

**Testimony of Melissa Spear**  
**Executive Director of Common Ground**  
**358 Springside Avenue, New Haven**  
**Submitted to the Appropriations Committee**  
**February 21, 2013**

Honorable Chairs, Members of the Appropriations Committee;

Good Evening. My name is Melissa Spear. I am the executive director of Common Ground, a center for environmental learning and leadership in New Haven, CT. Our organization is committed to "cultivating habits of healthy living and sustainable environmental practice in a diverse community of children, young people and adults." At the heart of our work is Common Ground High School, a public charter school founded in 1997 upon our state's adoption of enabling legislation.

My two children both attended Amity Regional High School, which serves the communities of Bethany, Woodbridge and Orange. While there, they were able to take advantage of the many and varied resources available to them, from AP Latin to AP physics; from band to ceramics; from college counseling to senior internships. Working at Common Ground while my children attended Amity, I was astonished by the significant difference in resources available to those attending a well-funded school like Amity versus an under-funded school like Common Ground.

That being said, I want to be clear: Common Ground is not looking to emulate Amity. Our students come to us because of our unique offering: a small, intimate school community embedded within a non-profit environmental education center and urban farm that support a pedagogy of experiential learning. Our students are deeply engaged in solving real-world challenges faced by our New Haven community – helping tackle problems such as food access, poor nutrition and environmental degradation. While preparing for college they also prepare for life by learning about food production on our farm, assisting environmental educators during our children's programs and working with other non-profits serving the New Haven community.

We are committed to developing the next generation of successful college graduates, ready to assume productive roles as community and environmental leaders. The current level of funding for charter schools creates significant challenges for meeting what a school like Amity considers the most BASIC academic needs of their students. Just last year, with the increase in funding from \$9,400 to \$10,500-per-pupil (subsequently cut to \$10,200) we were able to offer calculus to our students for the first time. We also added four AP classes, hired our first part-time, certified health and physical education teacher, and intensified our wrap around academic supports. But, we are still far short of where we need to be, especially considering the at-risk population of students we serve.

The current proposed funding of \$10,500-per-pupil in 2014 is still significantly below the established per-pupil "Foundation" funding level of \$12,000. Insufficient funding requires that every year, in order to meet the most basic needs of our students, we are forced to divert significant resources toward

raising more than \$400,000 from other funders. At the same time we are putting significant effort into implementing several new state requirements, including adopting the Common Core, developing student success portfolios, carrying out school climate initiatives and putting in place the new teacher evaluation system – all without additional State support. On top of all this, we are facing the elimination of State support for after-school programming that is key to keeping our students engaged in productive activity throughout the day.

Common Ground is not asking for anything more than what is fair and equitable. The students of our public charter school deserve to build their futures on the same basic academic foundation as the students at Amity. A budget that increases our funding to \$10,500 in 2014 and \$11,500 in 2015 as promised by the Education Reform Law will ensure this goal is within our reach.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the students of Common Ground.